

“And so We Came to Rome” (Acts 28)

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Let me ask you a question: Who is the freest person you know? If you imagine the person who is most free, what would that person be like? Would it be someone with the most money? Someone with the most free time? Someone with the most power? Someone with the least amount of responsibility?

This week I talked with someone who wanted to retire very early. I suppose he was hoping to enjoy more free time. Like a lot of people, he wanted to have the freedom to travel. This week I also talked to someone who is self-employed. He feels he is more free because he has a flexible schedule.

That may sound reasonable to you. But what if I told that the most liberated person in the world could be in chains and still be free? You might think I’m crazy.

Well, let’s think about freedom for a moment. We often think of freedom as being freedom *from*: freedom from an authority over us, freedom from responsibility, freedom from doing things that we don’t want to do.

But freedom *from* is only half of the picture of freedom. We also need to be free *for* something or free *to* do something. Os Guinness, a Christian social critic and writer, wrote a book about what is happening in America called *A Free People’s Suicide*. In that book, he writes a bit about the nature of freedom. He says, “Negative freedom . . . is freedom *from*—in essence, freedom from interference and constraint. Positive freedom is freedom *for*—in essence, freedom for excellence according to whatever vision and ideals define that excellence.”¹ If you suddenly won a large sum of money and didn’t need to work anymore, you would be free from work. But if you didn’t do something else that’s productive, you wouldn’t be free to feel productive. You wouldn’t be free to feel that your life has significance or meaning, or that you were helping someone else.

Os Guinness also writes in that same book this powerful truth: “An endless proliferation of trivial and unworthy choices is not freedom but slavery by another name. Freedom is not

¹ Os Guinness, *A Free People’s Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 61.

choice so much as the right choice, good choice and wise choice.”² I would argue that you aren’t really free unless you’re free to do what you want *and* what you want to do is the right thing to do. Unless we are free to do voluntarily the right thing, we aren’t free. I would also argue that when we have freedom in area in our lives, that requires giving up freedom in another area of our lives.

Let me explain those ideas. First, if we’re not free to do the right thing because we want to do it, we’re not free. We can do the wrong thing voluntarily, but that means our souls are enslaved. In that case, we’re hostage to some disordered desire. We’re addicted to doing something that is bad for us. The apostle Peter writes about this when he talks about false teachers who taught their followers some form of sexual promiscuity. He writes, “They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19).

Of course, we can do the right thing against our will. Someone could hold a gun to our head and tell us to take care of the poor and pay our taxes or tell the truth. But, obviously, that’s not freedom. It’s only when we are able to choose to do the right thing because we want to do it that we’re really free.

Then there’s that second idea: In order to be free in one area of life, we have to give up freedom in other areas. I have a friend named Jeremy who is the greatest pianist I have ever known personally. He plays the most difficult piano pieces by Liszt, Ravel, and other composers. Years ago, he told me what he tells other people. He says, “If you want to play the piano like me, all you have to do is play for five hours a day for ten years.” In order to be free to play the piano at the highest level, Jeremy has to chain himself to that piano bench for hours a day. If he stops practicing that much, he won’t be as free to play as well as he could and as well as he wants.³

Everyone who wants to be free has to come under some kind of authority or some kind of restriction. The celebrity who wants to be free to be rich and famous gives up privacy. The model who wants to be free to be beautiful gives up eating certain kinds of foods. The athlete

² Ibid., 151.

³ Tim Keller also uses the example of playing the piano when he discusses the nature of freedom. He writes, “If you have the musical aptitude, you may give yourself to practice, practice, practice the piano for years. This is a restriction, a limit on your freedom. There are many other things you won’t be able to do with the time you invest in practicing. If you have the talent, however, the discipline and limitation will unleash your ability that would otherwise go untapped. What have you done? You’ve deliberately lost your freedom to engage in some things in order to release yourself to a richer kind of freedom to accomplish other things.” Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 46-47.

who wants to be free to win comes under the authority of coaches, trainers, and nutritionists and loses hours of free time to practice and training.

I mention all of this because now, as we finish the book of Acts, we see something paradoxical: The apostle Paul is still under the custody of Roman soldiers—in fact, he says he is in chains!—and yet he is free. He is free to tell other people about Jesus, which is what he longed to do. He’s free because it’s the right thing to do. He’s free because his purpose in life was to tell people why Jesus is very good news indeed. And even though Paul is met with hostility, the kingdom of God advanced because of what was happening in his life.

Let’s now turn to Acts 28. As you do that, here’s a brief reminder of where we’ve been. Paul was a Jewish man who had been opposed to Christianity until Jesus appeared to him and turned his life around. Paul then traveled throughout the Roman Empire telling others about Jesus. While in Jerusalem, some other Jews opposed to Paul made false charges against him and a mob nearly killed Paul. In order to stop a riot from forming, Roman soldiers took custody of Paul. In order to protect him from being killed, they brought him to Caesarea and put him on trial. No one could prove that Paul was guilty of doing anything against Roman law. But Paul wanted to make sure he didn’t fall in to the hands of the Jews in Jerusalem. He wanted to make sure that they didn’t decide his fate. So, since he was a Roman citizen, he demanded that he have a trial before Caesar, the emperor. On the way from Caesarea to Rome, his ship was caught up in a storm and the ship got blown off course, ending up on the shores of an island called Malta.

So, with that, let’s start reading. I’ll begin by reading verses 1-6:

¹After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. ²The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. ³When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. ⁴When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, “No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.” ⁵He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.⁴

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Malta is an island about 180 miles north of Africa and almost sixty miles south of Sicily. The natives of Malta were known as “barbarians,” not because they were barbaric, but because Greek wasn’t their native language. But they were hospitable. They helped all 276 passengers of the ship that was broken to bits. Paul and everyone on the ship had come on the island wet and cold, and the Maltese people made a fire for them. Paul tried to help out by adding sticks to the fire, and when he did, a snake bit him.

This is when things start to get a bit strange. At first, the native people assume that Paul was going to die because a poisonous snake bit him. They assume that Paul is bit because he had done something bad, like murdering a person. They assume he has been judged by the Greek goddess of justice known as Dikē. It’s not uncommon for people to assume that bad things happen to bad people. But Paul doesn’t die, of course. So the islanders assume that Paul must really be a god. Who else could survive a poisonous snake bite?

Paul not only doesn’t die, but he also helps heal others. Let’s read verses 7-10

⁷ Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. ⁸ It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him healed him. ⁹ And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. ¹⁰ They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

Publius may have been the leading citizen of the island. When he welcomes Paul, along with Luke (the author of Acts who includes himself in the “we” sections), Paul heals his fathers. This man may have had what is called “Malta fever,” a gastric fever caused by a microbe found in goat’s milk. At any rate, Paul heals him. Then others who have diseases come to Paul and they also are cured. Luke says that he and Paul were “honored . . . greatly.” This probably means the Maltese people gave them money.

The point of this passage is to show how special Paul is. His healing of the sick reminds us of Jesus’ miracles of healing (cf. Luke 4:38-41). Paul’s surviving a snake bite also reminds of something Jesus said in Luke 10:19: “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.” Nothing can stop Paul. No unbelieving opponents, no Gentile rulers, no shipwreck, and no snake can keep Paul from doing what he was supposed to do.

I often realize that many people are opposed to the miraculous. They either want to write off the entire Bible because it contains miracles or they want to interpret events that seem to be miraculous in a non-miraculous way. In other words, they say, “Miracles are impossible. These people only thought these events were miracles because they didn’t know science.” People who look at things in this way would claim that the snake that bit Paul must not have been poisonous, and that perhaps the people who were healed were actually healed by Luke, who was a doctor. That’s logically possible. And if that were the case, that doesn’t mean that God wasn’t behind those healings. God can use doctors as well as miracles to heal people. Miracles are only more direct healings by God. But it seems that Luke is reporting miracles. These islanders might not have known a lot about science, but they knew a poisonous snake when they saw one, and they knew what happened to people when they were bit by poisonous snakes. But Paul lived, and this was amazing to them.

We’re not promised that we will perform these sorts of miracles. But miracles do occur. Eyewitnesses around the globe have reported them happening. In fact, I recently heard a recording of a miracle that took place over twenty years ago. Duane Miller was a pastor who contracted a virus in 1990 that caused him to lose his voice. His voice became a nearly inaudible rasp. After seeing many doctors, he couldn’t find any help, so he stepped down from being a pastor. He and his family then became members of a large church in Houston. One Sunday in January 1993, the teacher of his Bible study class became sick. The church asked Miller to fill in, which he was able to do only with the help of a microphone. While teaching the class and talking about Psalm 103 and healing and “pit” experiences, his voice started to come back. It went from that whispering rasp to a healthy voice within a minute.⁵ Miracles are rare, and I’m skeptical when I hear reports about them, but they do still occur.

Now back to the story. Paul and company spent three months at Malta because it was winter, and sailing was a dangerous thing to do at that time. But when winter was over, they sailed toward Italy. Let’s read about that in verses 11-16:

¹¹ After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. ¹² Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. ¹³ And from there we made a circuit and arrived at

⁵ That recording can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuBV3uPxaAc>. Miller explains his miracle experience at Duane Miller, “‘The Miracle Moment’ Twenty Years Later,” *Miller Theology*, <https://millertheology.wordpress.com/2013/01/20/the-miracle-moment-20-years-later> (accessed September 11, 2016).

Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. ¹⁴ There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. ¹⁶ And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

They get on another ship from Alexandria, this time featuring the Gemini, Castor and Pollux, as the mastheads. These “sons of Zeus” were known as protectors and patrons of sailors. This time, the sailing is much less eventful. The ship first travels about ninety miles to Syracuse, the capital city of the island of Sicily. Then they sail to Rhegium, about seventy miles away on the southwest coast of Italy, or, on the toe of the boot of Italy. There, they wait for favorable winds in order to sail to Puteoli, because they had to sail through the Strait of Messina, between the rock of Scylla and the whirlpool of Charybdis. Puteoli was on the west coast of Italy, near Naples.

When they arrive on the mainland, they get on a road called the Appian Way and start walking toward Rome, which was about 130 miles away. Some Christians from that city come out to greet Paul, getting as far as a town called The Forum of Appius, about forty-three miles from Rome, and another town called The Three Taverns, about thirty-three miles from Rome. These Christians knew about Paul because he had written the letter of Romans to them about three years earlier.

Here, the verb that’s translated “to meet” is the one usually used when an official, even a king, approached a city. Citizens of the city would come out to greet the visitor and escort him back into the city. This is the verb used in Matthew 25:6 in the parable of the ten virgins, half of whom are ready to greet the bridegroom and bring him back into the marriage feast. It’s also used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, when we’re told that Christians will rise to meet Jesus. The point is that Paul is getting a royal reception, just as he received from Publius on Malta. Even though Paul is a prisoner, he’s clearly a very special individual, as this whole chapter shows.

When he gets to Rome, he is able to meet the leaders of the Jewish people in that city. Let’s read verses 17-22:

¹⁷ After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. ¹⁸ When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in

my case. ¹⁹ But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. ²⁰ For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” ²¹ And they said to him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. ²² But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”

The Jewish people in Rome hadn't heard about any charges made against Paul. Perhaps Paul got to Rome faster than the news could travel. What's more likely is that the Jews in Jerusalem who made up the charges against Paul decided not to pursue the issue. Paul was found innocent in Caesarea and their case wasn't going to get any better in Rome.

Paul says that he was found innocent. The only reason he is wearing a chain is because of “the hope of Israel.” What he means is that his message about Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's hopes. Paul taught that Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited anointed King, the Christ. This is the one that the Old Testament promised would come, the one who would make everything right. Jesus died on the cross for the sins of his people, bearing the curse that they deserve. And Jesus rose from the grave, showing that he had conquered death and sin. He also showed that when he returns in the future he will restore the whole broken world so that it will be a paradise. The hope of Israel is a Messiah who will rescue the people, a servant who will suffer in their place for their sins, and a resurrection of the dead. All these hopes were realized in Jesus.

Paul also hints at something interesting in verse 19. He says he appealed to Caesar, meaning that he demanded a trial in Rome in front of the emperor. But, he says, “I had no charge to bring against my nation.” He means that he didn't seek out a trial in Rome in order to make countercharges against Jewish people. I suppose Paul could have countersued those who brought false charges against them. Maybe this is something of a veiled threat. It could be Paul's way of saying, “You don't want to do what those Jews in Jerusalem did to me.”

At any rate, these Jewish leaders say they have heard nothing against Paul. But they do want to hear what he has to say about Christianity. They say, in verse 22, that the “sect” of Christianity is spoken against everywhere.

So, at a later time, they come to Paul. Paul is basically under house arrest. He is guarded by a soldier, who would be chained to him, but he has his own apartment and he can receive guests. Let's read verses 23-28:

²³ When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴ And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. ²⁵ And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:

²⁶ “Go to this people, and say,
“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”

²⁷ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’

²⁸ Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”

When Paul speaks to these Jewish leaders about Jesus, he shows how the Old Testament anticipated the coming of Jesus. The whole Bible is about the kingdom of God—his rule over his people who live in his place⁶—and the whole Bible is really about Jesus. Paul must have spent hours showing how passages in the Old Testament pointed to Jesus. And what was the result? “Some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved” (v. 24). Since some disbelieved, Paul quotes a passage from the Old Testament. We see this in verses 26-27. The passage Paul cites is Isaiah 6:9-10. In that passage, God (more specifically, Jesus; see John 12:40-41), appears to the prophet Isaiah and tells him his job. Isaiah was going to warn the people of Israel about judgment. He was also going to tell them about the Messiah and “the hope of Israel.” But many wouldn’t believe this message. Though the people had ears, they wouldn’t listen and understand. Though they had eyes that could physically see, they wouldn’t be able to see the truth. Paul saw himself in a similar role, particularly when it came to speaking to his fellow Jews.

Before we move on, I want to point out that when Paul introduces this quotation, he says, “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet” (v. 25). This shows that when Scripture speaks, God speaks. God revealed his word through human beings. So

⁶ I’m paraphrasing Graeme Goldsworthy’s definition here. See his *Gospel and Kingdom* in Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2000).

we can say, “Isaiah said . . .,” but ultimately, we must say, “God said . . .” (see also Acts 1:16; 4:25).

In verse 28, Paul says that this message of salvation has been sent to the Gentiles. Unlike these hard-hearted Jews, the Gentiles will listen. Of course, Paul doesn’t mean all Gentiles. But a few times throughout the book of Acts, Paul indicates that if the Jews don’t listen, he will go to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46; 18:6). As Paul writes in Romans, the gospel is the power of salvation “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). Salvation came from the Jewish people (John 4:22), because God had given them the Old Testament and the Messiah came from their people. But salvation ultimately is granted to all types of people, both Jews and non-Jews.

That doesn’t mean that Paul ever gave up on his fellow Jews. He continued to preach the gospel to them throughout his life. He wanted so badly to have Jews put their faith in Jesus that he writes, in Romans 9:3, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” In other words, Paul was willing to be condemned to hell if only it would save his fellow Jewish. He was willing to take their place in hell if that were possible, which it is not. There already was a Jewish man who experienced hell in place of others, and that is Jesus, who experienced hell on earth when he bore the full brunt of God’s wrath on the cross. Yet many Jewish people rejected Jesus. They didn’t believe. Still, Paul wanted more Jewish people to come to faith in Jesus so they could have eternal life. This shows that there is no eternal life outside of a relationship with Jesus. There is no hope. And Paul took this very seriously.

Now, let’s read the final two verses of Acts, verses 30 and 31:

³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Paul remained under house arrest for two years. He probably had to wait that long because the imperial court had a backlog of cases. During that time, Paul had enough freedom to receive visitors. So though he was a prisoner, he welcomed all kinds of people—Jews and Gentiles—and he told them about Jesus. He was able to do this boldly and without hindrance. There’s some irony there. Paul, chained to a prison guard, wasn’t hindered.

Some of Paul’s writings shed light on this situation. In his letter to the Philippians, written while he was in prison in Rome, Paul writes,

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear (Phil. 1:12-14).

We would often think that the worst thing to happen would be for a Christian to be put into prison for his or her faith. But Paul knew that even his imprisonment helped “to advance the gospel.” He had an opportunity to preach to his prison guards and his imprisonment for the faith helped embolden other Christians. It gave them the confidence to speak out in faith.

Luke doesn't tell us what happened after those two years. He doesn't tell us what happened at the end of Paul's life. He wasn't writing a biography of Paul. Instead, Luke was focused on how Christianity spread from Jerusalem to the capital city of the Roman Empire. So at the beginning of Acts, Jesus tells his disciples that they were to be his witnesses in “Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samara, and to the end of the earth” (1:8). Now Paul is in Rome, which wasn't the end of the earth per se, but it was the heart of the earth at that time. Acts begins with Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God and it ends with Paul doing the same.

From what we know of Paul's letters and Christian history, it seems that he was released from prison in the year 62. Then, he traveled more until he was arrested again at some point, probably after the year 64, when the emperor, Nero, started persecuting Christians. It was during this time that Paul wrote 2 Timothy, the last letter he wrote. Then Paul was beheaded.

We're not sure when Luke wrote the book of Acts. Perhaps he wrote it soon after Paul was released from prison. Perhaps he wrote it a few years later, after Paul died. But Luke intentionally ends the book of Acts in the way he does, with Paul in chains but freely proclaiming the message of Jesus. It ends with a note of triumph. Paul was in chains, but the gospel was unchained. That's exactly what Paul writes in 2 Timothy, shortly before he was put to death:

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! (2 Tim. 2:8-9)

So, we have come to the end of the book of Acts. How does this apply to our lives?

Well, I think we should learn to be more like Paul. You don't see Paul throwing himself a pity party because he was in prison. He knows that it is because of his imprisonment that he is in

Rome. And that's exactly where he wanted to be. He wanted to preach the gospel to people in that city. He was truly free because he was doing God's will and because he desired to do God's will, regardless of the circumstances. I quote Os Guinness earlier. He says this about true freedom: "Internal, or spiritual, freedom is the freedom that can be achieved by individuals regardless of their external circumstances."⁷ Paul was truly free.

Do we experience this freedom? I think we are too often kept from evangelism by the chains of our fear and our need to please other people. And because we don't share the gospel though we know we should, we're not free. I also think it's difficult to feel free at many times in our lives because we live in a fallen world. But we must remember what we have in Jesus. If you have a relationship with Jesus, he has taken the punishment for all of your sins. All of them. It's as though you owed a massive amount of money to God himself and he paid that debt for you so you don't owe anything anymore. And those who have a relationship with Jesus have the promise of eternal life. Though we die in this life, we will live forever with Jesus in a perfect world. We will one day be resurrected from the dead. No amount of pain and suffering this life can take away that reality.

If you don't have a relationship with Jesus today, all you need to do is turn to him in faith. I would love to talk to you individually if you don't have that yet.

I think there's something else that we can learn. Though Christianity is often opposed, it will be never be killed. Though Christians may be chained, Christianity itself never will be. This is important to realize as America continues to change and as hostility to the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3) is opposed. C. S. Lewis writes this at the end of *Mere Christianity*:

"Again and again it [the world] has thought Christianity was dying, dying by persecutions from without and corruptions from within, by the rise of Mohammedanism [Islam], the rise of the physical sciences, the rise of great anti-Christian revolutionary movements. But every time the world has been disappointed. Its first disappointment was over the crucifixion. The Man came to life again. In a sense—and I realise how frightfully unfair it must seem to them—that has been happening ever since. They keep on killing the thing that He started: and each time, just as they are putting down the earth on its grave, they suddenly

⁷ Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide*, 58.

hear that it is still alive and has even broken out in some new place. No wonder they hate us.”⁸

We need to continue to tell people about Jesus. No chains can stop us. The only thing that does is our fear, our lack of faith, and our lack of love of God and people. If we truly cared about the souls of other people, we would tell them about Jesus. We need to be like Jesus and like Paul, willing to suffer so that others might go free.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 222.